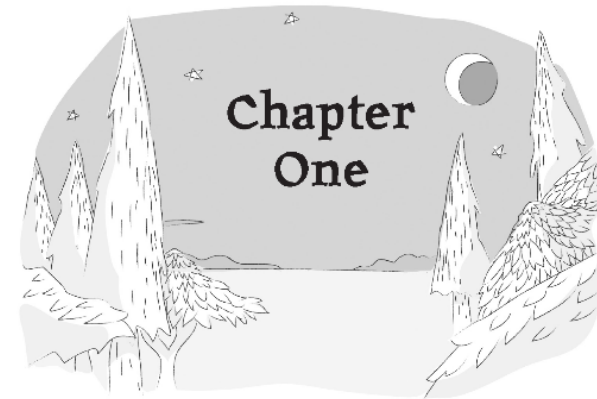


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Will Rivers took a step back from the wall. He clamped the end of his paintbrush between his teeth and admired his work. Well, his painting was certainly big. And purple. Very purple. Will smiled with satisfaction. He had captured the shape and features really well. It looked great. Almost perfect in fact.

A voice next to him said, ‘Oh mate, what have

shape and features really well. It looked great. Almost perfect in fact.

A voice next to him said, 'Oh mate, what have you done?'

Will hadn't noticed his friend Isaac come and stand next to him. Isaac was examining Will's painting with a sour look on his face.



'I mean, seriously. That's not how an elephant should look,' said Isaac.

‘What d’you mean?’ replied Will.

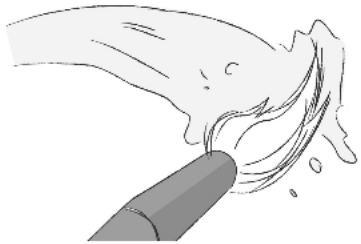
‘Durr! The colour. What’s that about?’

‘What’s wrong with it?’ asked Will.

‘What are you? Six?’ said Isaac. ‘Make-believe stuff is fine for sad little kids in the infants who don’t know anything. Now it’s just tragic.’

Will felt his cheeks glowing warmly. Not for the first time, he wondered why he was friends with Isaac.

Isaac continued, ‘The teacher is not going to be happy with you; everyone else is doing it right. Look.’



Isaac pointed to the line of children stretched out along the wall of the zoo. Will looked at his classmates, who were all busy painting differ-

ent animals on the wall. His new teacher, Mrs Barnes, was inspecting a tiger painted by a group of girls. It was Mrs Barnes who had organized this whole special project to paint a giant mural on the wall of the local zoo. She had reminded the class several times what an honour it was. She had also reminded them not to mess it up. Many times. Will frowned.

‘Seriously, mate. Why couldn’t you just do a normal elephant?’ asked Isaac with a sigh.

‘I was being creative,’ muttered Will.

‘Well, you weren’t told to do that. It’s probably against the rules.’

Will gulped. ‘Rules? What rules?’ He glanced over at Mrs Barnes nervously.

‘Durr! The rules of life. You know? Elephants are grey, zebras are black and white, penguins are

orange.'

'Orange?' repeated Will.

Isaac rolled his eyes. 'I was being sarcastic.'

Will looked at his giant picture of the purple elephant. He suddenly realized what was missing. 'Anyway, it isn't finished yet,' he told Isaac firmly. He picked up a clean paintbrush and grabbed a tube of bright yellow paint. He squeezed a blob onto his palette. Will stepped forward and painted a large yellow symbol in the centre of the elephant's forehead.



'Oh, very realistic,' said Isaac with a slow shake of his head. 'What's that?'

'An eternity symbol,'

replied Will. 'It's the same as the tattoo my grandma got in India.'

'Your grandma's got a tattoo?' said Isaac, wrinkling up his nose.

'Yeah! She's got loads. So what?' said Will.

'You're gonna be in such trouble for this,' Isaac muttered and sloped off back to his place in the line.

Will tried to pretend he didn't care. He spotted Mrs Barnes wandering in his direction and his heart suddenly raced in his chest. Will didn't want to get in trouble. He never set out to break the rules. He was the only person in his family who was normal like that.

'Pack up your things, Year Five,' called out Mrs Barnes. 'Time to walk back to school.'

Will sighed with relief. He quickly packed up

his materials. As he headed off to join his class, he glanced back at his purple painting. Although he was still worried about being in trouble, he really liked it. There was something kind of magical about it and he was proud of himself.



Will flung open the back gate to his house. He stalked down the side of the strange shed that his grandma lived in at the bottom of the garden. Ahead of him, Will could hear his grandma's voice. She spoke with such a big, rich voice for such a tiny person. She was telling one of her stories. 'And just in time, the Ant General ordered the army of ants to help,' she was saying.

Will entered the garden and saw his grandma

sitting on the steps of her shed. Across from her, Will's six-year-old brother Charlie was lying on the grass with his head on his scrunched-up school jumper. Their grandma, with her wild white hair and battered walking boots, peered over her glasses at Will. 'Good afternoon,' she said.



‘Hi, Grandma,’ Will replied quietly. He kept walking. He wasn’t in the mood to chat.



Will’s pride in his painting had worn off. He had been fretting on his walk home. Isaac had been right. Why had he done it purple? Elephants were grey. That was how you were supposed to paint them. He was going to be in trouble for sure.

‘Join us for the story?’ asked his grandma. Will pretended not to hear her and continued towards the house. ‘Will, dear, is everything okay?’ she asked.

‘Sorry, Grandma,’ he replied over his shoulder. ‘I’ve got tons of homework to do. Mrs Barnes, our new teacher, gives us loads extra.’

‘Hey, Will,’ said Charlie. ‘Wait a sec.’

Will turned towards him. His scruffy little brother was smiling at him. ‘What?’ Will said impatiently.

‘I’ve got a new teacher too.’

‘No you haven’t.’

‘I have! She’s got wonky eyes,’ insisted Charlie.

‘No, Charlie. Not one of your jokes, please,’ groaned Will.

‘I’m not joking. She’s a rubbish teacher though.’

‘Why?’

‘She can’t control her pupils!’ Charlie said and giggled. ‘Geddit?’

‘Oh, Charlie, I love it!’ exclaimed Grandma Rivers. She threw her head back and honked with laughter. Will smiled weakly and turned towards the house. Grandma Rivers lifted her glasses and wiped away a tear. ‘Right, where were we?’ she said. ‘Ahhh yes, and as everyone knows, an army of ants can be as strong as an ox.’ And with that,

she continued her story.

‘Ants aren’t like oxen and elephants aren’t purple,’ Will muttered to himself. ‘Stupid make-believe, stupid jokes, stupid mural.’

‘Hi, Will,’ said a girl’s voice. It was Riya, Will’s next-door neighbour. He hadn’t noticed her before as she was sitting on top of the wall between their houses. Will looked up at his friend. He wasn’t sure he would be quite so confident up that high. ‘Oh, hi,’ he replied. ‘Your hair. You’ve changed it again. It looks kind of purple. And silver.’



Riya smiled and nodded. ‘I couldn’t decide, so I just went for both,’ she said with a shrug. ‘Mum’s cross about it. Says I never think things

through.'

'Looks cool,' said Will.

'I've got some of the purple spray left. You want it?' she asked. Will shook his head quickly. 'Come on, Will. Where's your sense of adventure?' Riya asked with a smirk. Will looked away. He wouldn't have dared to dye his hair, especially without permission. Riya changed the subject. 'Well, are you both excited?' she asked. 'You and Grandma Rivers? It's both your birthdays tomorrow. You're going to catch up with me at last, right?'

Will felt his cheeks glow a little: Riya was nearly eleven. 'Sure, ten. Tomorrow,' he said.

A cross voice called out from next door's garden, 'Riya, I've told you before. Get down from there. It's dangerous!'

Riya twisted round. 'But I'm listening to Grandma Rivers' story,' she protested.

'Get down and come and tidy up this mess you've made please,' replied Riya's mum.

Riya turned back to Will. 'Well, happy birthday for tomorrow,' she said and swung her legs back over the wall. 'See ya.' She dropped out of sight, but seconds later, Will heard her talking to her mum.

'It's not a mess. It's a sculpture,' Riya said.

'Made from my onions and potatoes?' exclaimed her mum.

Will smiled. 'See ya,' he said and headed up the steps to the back door.



That night, Will couldn't get to sleep. On the bunk bed below, Charlie had gone out like a light and was snoring loudly. Will wondered what present his parents had bought him. Please let it be the phone, he thought. He was going to be ten after all. Ten! He wondered if he'd feel different in the morning. More grown-up and clever, like Riya. Charlie's snoring was getting even louder. Will huffed. A phone would be great, he thought, but so would having his own room.

There was another noise in the distance. Will recognized it. The zoo was only a few streets away and Will could often hear the animals. He realized the window was open and the sound of squawking flamingos was drifting in on the night air.

Will climbed down the ladder and crossed over

to the window. He opened a chink in the curtain and peered out over the rooftops in the direction of the zoo. The flamingos were still screeching and squawking. Will wondered why they were being so noisy. He yanked the window shut to muffle the noise. As he did so, he knocked into one of his pot plants on the windowsill.